



THE FIVE panels of 'Triptych' play on the classic Christian image of Mary with the archangels on either side of her. (Photos: Angelika Sher)



IN 'PIETA,' Sher riffs on the iconic image of Mary with the Baby Jesus.



'WATERMELON EATERS' presents a Last Supper of sorts, against the background of the Jerusalem hills.

## Singing the 'Song of Deborah'

Artist Angelika Sher explores her daughter's experience in the IDF

• ARIEL DOMINIQUE HENDELMAN

Angelika Sher grew up in Lithuania, which was part of the Soviet Union at the time. As it was not known for being a haven of artistic or spiritual nourishment; Sher grew up with the backdrop of proletarian dictatorship and atheism. In Vilna, where Sher's family lived, synagogues were routinely destroyed, yet the Christian clerical architecture remains to this day. Sher emigrated to Israel in 1990, during the disintegration of the USSR.

"Lithuania had become increasingly nationalistic as it was fighting for independence," Sher recalls. "I came to Israel to be with my Jewish family, to feel warmth and experience freedom."

Sher settled into her new Israeli life and, as she puts it, was striving to survive in a capitalist world. She began studying radiography in university, but after giving birth to her first child, Deborah, Sher transitioned from capturing the images of inner organs to photographing the exterior world. It was a rather natural progression. Integrating into the Israeli art scene, Sher found it to be rather open, although some gallerists tended to look for a continuation of purely Israeli dialogue in art and struggled to accept that immigrants could make their unique impact as well, with their own points of view and stories to tell.

Sher's newest exhibition, on display until the end of December at the Zemack Contemporary Art Gallery in

Tel Aviv, is a perfect example of this, where she drew inspiration from her daughter's experience in the IDF.

"The intensity of mental and emotional stress around Deborah's mobilization was so powerful, that it was accompanying me permanently, regardless of what I did," Sher says. "This led to a strong symbiosis with my daughter. My delicate and fragile baby was transformed by the uniform and the ranks. My pride in her became intertwined with anxiety. I never invent a theme for my art, I always take full advantage of my daily experience."

This is not the first time that Sher has drawn on Deborah for artistic inspiration; past bodies of work have also focused on her. From one series to the next, Sher has both followed and observed her daughter growing up. This has enabled her to relive childhood and adolescence anew, or at least vicariously. But there is also a separation; at Deborah's age, Sher was in Lithuania dreaming of meeting a charming young man. She was not dressed in army green fatigues, carrying an M-16. The photographs that comprise "Song of Deborah" reflect this paradox: the intimacy of the mother/daughter relationship with the accompanying estrangement born of inter-generational as well as cultural divides.

Sher's photographs are bold, provocative and beautiful. They are also bound to and rebelling against the European art and Christian iconography that she was surrounded by growing up. *Triptych* takes after the five canonical poses of Maria in the Russian Orthodox Church. Maria is originally shown in prayer, but in Sher's photograph, five scenes depict female soldiers and dogs against a blue sky.

"The soldier figure, whose hands are raised to protect, or perhaps surrendering, is a horrifying allusion to a famous photograph of a Jewish boy in the ghetto.



ANGELIKA SHER: Leaving no one indifferent. (Wikimedia Commons)

The soldier wears a military identification disk around her neck, which is evocative of the icons worn by devout Christians. The soldier's hand is decorated with a tattoo of a rose – one of Jesus' symbols – surrounded by the inscription, 'Accept myself unconditionally,' (a quote from the IDF oath). The 'Maria Ornate' here is flanked by two archangels: Michael (the military commander) and Gabriel (the voice of the Creator). Originally, both are depicted as the same person, dressed in different clothes. In the photograph, they are portrayed by a young woman of conscription age. Like Gabriel, she is tough-looking: dressed in Gothic

'TRIPTYCH GEULA' depicts the diverse cultural mosaic of Jerusalem as seen through its residents.



clothes, her head shaved, and her earlobes gouged. But when she assumes the appearance of Michael, she looks like a thin and frail girl, dressed in an IDF uniform that is too big for her, and the tough appearance has all but gone."

Another photograph, *Pieta*, borrows from one of the most recognizable images in Christianity: Mary weeping over the crucified body of her son. The most famous pieta is by Michelangelo, and was often photographed by artists such as Boaz Tal, Vardi Kahana, Adi Ness. Sher searched for an original interpretation of the image, while seeking to avoid excessive dramatization. In her photograph, a dark haired female soldier is depicted at a bus stop, holding her army bag as if it was her own child wrapped in a blanket.

In another photograph, *The Birth*, bent figures of female soldiers (along with two dogs) peer down at a newborn baby with a mix of apprehension and fascination.

"Soldier-maids represent a contrast between the military uniform and the purity of the newborn, while highlighting the woman's role as birth-giver," Sher explains. "Like in the classical scene, domestic animals are present, traditionally symbolizing the simple people. In my work they are represented by my dogs."

Sher's photograph *Watermelon Eaters* depicts a kind of Last Supper. She states that she was trying to avoid the Last Supper as a theme because it is so commonly

used. However, when she failed to find a single church without the image, she ultimately gave in. Drawing on the famous version by Leonardo Da Vinci, the female soldiers are photographed standing and sitting around a blue table with the Jerusalem hills in the background, as they eat a watermelon. According to Sher, the red fruit represents not only Christ's blood and body, but also the essence of the Israeli experience. The name of the work alludes to the renowned *The Potato Eaters* piece by Van Gogh. One of Sher's dogs is once again depicted in the lower right corner; head jutting out from underneath the table.

In one of Sher's most breathtaking photographs, *Triptych Geula*, a snapshot of Jerusalem's diverse human mosaic is depicted against stark Jerusalem stone.

"The *Triptych* shot in Jerusalem shows a city of conflict and strife, a place of an ongoing power struggle," Sher adds. "Jerusalem symbolizes the arena of conflictual relations between religions, streams and factions in Israeli society, and between women and men in the public sphere. Today we are witnessing a social struggle with the #MeToo movement, led by women who are no longer willing to be victims. Women are moving away from the passive, silent and victimized position. Supported by the entire sisterhood of women, they are leading a change in social perceptions and the behavior they imply. This signifies that change is possible. *Triptych Geula* shows Palm Sunday,

after the holiday that marks the arrival of Jesus to Jerusalem. At its center is the Messiah, described as a poor man who will arrive on the back of an animal that serves as an agricultural tool and 'not a weapon of war.' This Salvation [in Hebrew – Geula, which is also a female name] will make the world a better and more just place, a world where peace, friendship and comradery prevail."

When asked how the audience has reacted to "Song of Deborah," Sher emphasizes that no one remains indifferent. Her work highlights the intersection of cultures, history and religion in a truly unique manner. Some viewers have been puzzled, attracted or surprised by the unusual mixture of familiar symbols and images; "Song of Deborah" is provoking them to think and open their eyes to the world around them. Sher, while happy with her current exhibition, already has plans for her next one. Her son will join the army next year, a change that will bring with it plenty more fodder for artistic expression and capturing moments with the lens.

When Deborah herself was asked how she feels to be the star of her mother's photographic exhibition, she responds, "For me, it's really special that a series so big and impressive made by my mother is named after me. The very fact that my mother chose to do these series after a difficult period I experienced in my life is really exciting."